



Biden’s Task and Ours

BY JOEL ROGERS

Biden’s chief task is to restore broad confidence that government can improve people’s lives by actually doing so, and thereby build popular support for doing more. Serving the many not the few, he should firmly break with the half-century of Democratic neoliberalism that did the opposite. Using whatever power he has (the Executive branch alone, or with the whole Congress if he gets it in January’s Georgia runoff), he should do this quickly, legally, and repeatedly, each time broadcasting in clear terms just what he’s doing and why. He should aim for programs that help lots of people, particularly the non-college-educated working-class majority, with easily understood and tangible benefits and minimal red tape in getting them, that are already overwhelmingly popular or would naturally become so (think Social Security or Medicare). The list of policies that have these characteristics is too long for this space, but today probably begins with getting COVID relief (unemployment benefits and protection from eviction) to the vulnerable and cheap vaccines to all. It continues with laying down the planks of a new social contract: making work pay with higher minimum wages and wage supplements; universalizing citizen access to high-speed communication, cheap mobility, safe water and food, affordable housing, quality healthcare and childcare, post-secondary education and training; paying for it by progressive taxes on top earners/consumers and available Federal Reserve Board and Treasury powers for productive social investment; reinvigorating our democracy and citizen contribution to it by securing the vote, getting big private money out of elections and freer choice within them, investing more in public-minded media, and making federalism work for and not against democracy with a hard new national floor of services every citizen has by right but encouragement rather than preemption of locals choosing to go above it—building a nation of neighborhoods and communities, with more substantive national citizenship and more local control.

Doing these things will help end the public cynicism about politics and fear of the future that everywhere underwrite voter endorsement of GOP greed and nihilism. It will begin to build the durable progressive Democratic majority needed for further progress toward a society worth living in.

The left should help Biden in this. Along with “friendly persuasion” to answer his better angels, we should defend him in battles with reactionaries and help him get even

small wins moving in the right direction. This doesn’t mean abandoning our more radical loving hopes for a Third Reconstruction, but it does mean taking those hopes, and the enormity of the task of realizing them, and our role in furthering that task, more seriously. We need to learn, as a movement, to value actually improving things for most people more than commenting on their many deficiencies, recognize that our fragmentation and insularity is the chief cause of our political weakness, and work toward deeper agreement among ourselves and better organizational alignment in getting something useful done. We should at least try to come together around a few great ambitions for this country over the next generation – what sort of place we really want it to be, operating under what rules at home and be what sort of example to the rest of the world – and a plausible and shared theory of change of how we propose to get from here to there. We need a shared plan on how to organize and allocate the resources to that work, which will indeed likely take a long while with lots of reversal along the way. And, perhaps especially, we need to build a kinder and more functional culture among ourselves in doing that

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work that will attract people to doing it with us.

And then, guided by these ambitions and plan of action and culture – from wherever and however we may now be organized, staying in touch and never getting too agitated or angry with one another, constantly revising particulars of our analysis and plan, seizing whatever opportunities for progress we may have and helping each other stand up again after inevitable defeats, working with both our social movements and with candidates and electeds, and always inside and independently outside the Democratic Party – we should settle in for and commit ourselves to playing and gradually mastering the long hard game required for real power and enduring and radically positive political change.

That’s a life worth living and a future worth fighting for.

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